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Mosques in the United States of America and Canada

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This catalogue shows pictures of a photo exhibition of mosques in the United States and Canada provided by Dr. Omar Khalidi and David Donnellon. Dr. Khalidi is a researcher and chronicler of mosque architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. David Donnellon is one of the architects of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan. The exhibit was put together by the U.S. Consulate General in Frankfurt and was first presented in October 2006 at Stadtbibliothek Gallus in Frankfurt. Next stops will be Cologne, Freiburg, Berlin, and Tübingen.

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Mosques in North America

Omar Khalidi

Islam's first mosque, built in Madinah in 622, was a simple rectangular structure constructed of palm logs and adobe bricks. The United States' first purpose-built mosque, completed in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1934, was a simple rectangular building of white clapboard on a cinder-block foundation, with a dome over the front door.

In the 13 centuries that separate those buildings, mosque design has evolved differently in the different countries and cultures where Muslims live, and in the U.S., too, the thematic and visual characteristics of mosque architecture had to deal with a new environment - one that had its own pre-existing historical and visual vocabulary.

There are over 2,000 mosques in the United States, mostly housed in buildings originally built for other purposes. Of nearly 1,000 mosques and Islamic centers in the United States surveyed in the mid-1990's, fewer than 100 had originally been designed to be mosques and, of those, the older ones had not been designed by architects. Many of these simple buildings were meant to be used as cultural or community centers, with such facilities as classrooms, a library, a conference center, a bookshop, a kitchen and a social hall, as well as recreational facilities, residential apartments, and in some cases even a funeral home. They had a room for prayer, but they also served as clubs, with a social hall for weddings and parties and a basement for bingo games.

American mosques built in the last few decades, however, in the period in which Islam has begun to feel at home in the United States, are

almost universally architect-designed. And despite stylistic features that vary considerably, especially among the more elaborate mosques, all of them fall into one of three basic categories.

1. Imported Design

There are mosques that embody a traditional design transplanted entirely from Islamic lands. Examples are the Islamic Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. (built in 1957); the Islamic Cultural Center in Tempe, Arizona (1984), and the Islamic Center of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia (1990).

The Islamic Center of Washington, D.C. was the first of the large, traditionally designed structures, and architecturally it is still one of the most significant buildings that Muslims have built in the United States. It is listed, and thus protected, as a historical American building. It was designed by Mario Rossi, an Italian architect practicing in Cairo, with the help of engineers from the Egyptian Ministry of Pious Foundations, whose functions include care of mosques supported by religious endowments.

The transplanted-mosque approach has been used by Muslim and non-Muslim architects alike. For most of them, stylistic imitation meant „capturing the flavor“ of the old, the familiar—or, at most, „blending“ old and new. This nostalgic community of Muslims was of a

generation that, in the words of non-Muslim architect William Preston, sought „the stability and humanness embodied in vernacular and pre-modern architectures.“

The role of the architect is to bring back the past, the familiar; to make the users of the building feel at home; and to reinterpret its vocabulary in everyday language that can be easily understood.

2. Adapted Design

Other mosques represent a reinterpretation of tradition, sometimes combined with elements of American architecture. Examples are the Islamic Cultural Center in New York City (1991) and Daral-Islam in Abiquiu, New Mexico (1981).

Mosques that have attempted a reinterpretation of traditional architecture in the American landscape have had mixed results. The Islamic Cultural Center (ICC) of Manhattan is one example. It was designed by the prestigious firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and completed in 1991 on a site in uptown Manhattan at the intersection of Third Avenue and 96th Street. The project represents an effort to find an image that would please both the Muslim community and the larger, surrounding society. The mosque was designed for the use of Muslims in the New York City metropolitan area, who include high-profile, influential Muslim diplomats and others attached to the United Nations, consulates, and trade offices. During the design stage of the project, the ICC board appointed two advisory committees, one composed

of „prominent members“ of the Muslim community in New York, the other of architects, mostly non-Muslims. The debate between the two centered on the image of the mosque. The architects wanted a „mosque that belonged to the 21st century.“ The Muslims wanted the designers to reproduce the style of a traditional mosque with literal versions of historic motifs.

After a long and thoughtful debate the two committees agreed on a „modernist“ building, but with the Muslim committee insisting on the inclusion of both a minaret and a dome, neither of which were favored by the architects' committee. The conflicting perceptions of what a mosque ought to look like brought into high relief the salience for many Muslims of „old and familiar,“ a preference that many Westerners are unaware of and some Muslims prefer to disregard.

Similar to the Washington, D.C., mosque in conceptual framework, but differing in scale and location, is the Dar al-Islam mosque in Abiquiu, New Mexico, designed by the great Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. It was built in 1981 and is used predominantly by native-born American Muslims. The mosque's dramatic form, as sculptural as anything in the surrounding landscape, was achieved by combining a Byzantine and Sasanid dome, barrel vaults, and large, pointed arches. The Dar al-Islam mosque grew out of the same romanticized regional style that Fathy created for New Gourna in Egypt, and uses the same earthen construction. Because of New Mexico's cultural links to Spain, which nurtured a local mud-brick building tradition quite similar to that in New Gourna, Fathy's Dar al-Islam is certainly appropriate to its context.

3. Innovative Design

There are the designs that are entirely innovative, like those of the Islamic Society of North America's headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana (1979); the Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico (1981); the Islamic Center of Edmond, Oklahoma (1992) and the Islamic Center of Evansville, Indiana (1992).

A decisive departure from both the transplanting of traditional architecture and the modern reinterpretation of it can be found in the designs of Gulzar Haidar, a Pakistani-Canadian, and Bart Prince, an American. Their projects represent the innovative, the creative and the unprecedented mosque. Haidar advocates a design approach that is „environmental,” „morphological” and „semiotic.” His notable example is the mosque in the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) headquarters in Plainfield, Indiana. According to Haidar, Islamic architecture should be expressive and understandable to all. It should employ a form of language that invokes in immigrant Muslims a sense of belonging in their present and hope in their future. To the indigenous Muslims it should represent a linkage with Muslims from other parts of the world and should underscore the universality and unity of Islam. To the new Muslim this architecture should invoke confidence in their new belief. For non-Muslims it should take the form of clearly identifiable buildings which are inviting and open, or at least not secretive, closed, or forbidding.

The ISNA mosque has an austere contemporary character that is entirely without iconic references to traditional Islamic architecture. The solid exterior walls give few clues about what is inside. According to Haidar, the ISNA mosque addresses itself to Muslims through its concepts of al-batin („the hidden”) and al-zahir („the manifest”), two of the 99 beautiful names of God, through mystical geometry, and particularly through its cubical form, a subliminal reminder of the Ka'ba, the symbol of unity.

He relates his decision to contrast the inside and the outside to the fact that Muslims are a minority living in predominantly non-Islamic America. He sees this contrast as symbolic of the fact that Islam in this country is a private matter of faith, rather than the state religion that it is in much of the Islamic world.

Conceptually related to the ISNA headquarters in terms of innovative mosque design are a number of other Islamic centers. One was the Islamic Center of Albuquerque, New Mexico, completed in 1991, which was demolished in 2005 and is currently replaced by a new building. The former Islamic Center was designed by Bart Prince, a leading exponent of organic architecture. From a distance, the building resembled a giant set of bleachers reaching skyward in tiers and topped by towers that contained tall, narrow windows. Inside, the mosque was essentially one large hall divided at prayer times by a temporary partition to separate men from women. The ceiling stepped up with the tiers, supported by thick wooden beams and rafters made of bronze-colored pipe. Daylight poured through the narrow windows. It was a simple, elegant building, functional, and completely at home in its environment.

The work of the New Mexican architect resists easy translation into words. Dramatic and often unusual forms characterize this project, like his other buildings in New Mexico. His style is rooted in the peculiarly American tradition of organicism. Defined by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Oklahoman architect Bruce Goff, the organic tradition argues for the necessary individuality of each architect and each architectural design. The tradition's individualism makes it difficult to attribute a coherent set of stylistic characteristics to it. Coherence comes instead from a shared attempt to create an organically integral architecture that rethinks the possibilities of geometry, space, structure, and material.

Mosque Design in North America

What do these various mosque projects tell us about the nature and direction of mosque design in North America? New and culturally uncertain Muslim communities at first often constructed mosques that were architecturally nondescript. Better established communities have built a large number of mosques in the purely traditional styles found in their Muslim homelands, with little regard to their surroundings in North America. Some architects have experimented with reinterpreting traditional styles, using mixed designs and achieving equally mixed results. The innovative mosques of Haidar, Prince, and Karim have not always been well received by the immigrant Muslim communities because they do not match the immigrants' notions of what a mosque should be. Given the extreme diversity of America's Muslim population, it would seem logical to favor the unprecedented mosque, with maximum regard for the strictly Islamic requirements and minimum regard to ethnic or national taste or historical style, be that Ottoman, Mamluk, or Mughal. We have seen such a compromise reached in the case of the minaret of the ICC mosque.

Attachment to traditional design principles is, however, by and large restricted to first-generation immigrant Muslims. Their descendants and American converts to Islam, who will eventually constitute the majority of the U.S. Muslim population, will probably tip the scales in favor of more innovative architecture. Many Muslims of all backgrounds may even see this as responding to a prime Islamic imperative: to live in harmony with the total natural and historical environment of a place.

Adapted from the article "Mosque Design in the United States" by Omar Khalidi, Saudi Aramco World, November/December 2001 issue, pp. 24-33.



Islamic Center of America, Dearborn, Michigan.

Built 2005 by Alan Abbas and Luna Construction.
Designed by Paul Bertin and David Donnellon.

The largest mosque in the United States.



The golden hued domes, Moorish arches, and two 10-foot-tall minarets topped with crescent moons of solid brass are representative of traditional Islamic architecture. The central dome soars almost 20 meters high.



Islamic Cultural Center, Tempe, Arizona.

Built 1984 by M. Afzal Ibrahim.

The mosque includes a minaret and golden dome, attached to an eight-sided structure embellished with tilework depicting verses from the Qur'an, which are transcribed in calligraphy.



The architecture and decoration of the Islamic Culture Center was inspired by the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.



Islamic Center of Washington, Washington, DC.
Built in 1950 by Mario Rossi.

The first large traditional Islamic style structure in the United States was inspired by the Mamluk architecture of Cairo. The design also includes Ottoman Turkish and Andalusian decorative motifs. The interior furnishings are also a multi-ethnic mix. The wall tiles were donated by Turkey, the chandeliers are from Egypt, and the carpets were a gift from the Shah of Iran. Financed by the diplomatic missions of Islamic countries and wealthy Muslim sponsors, the project became a symbol of Muslim unity and identity in the United States. The building is listed in the Historic American Buildings Survey.



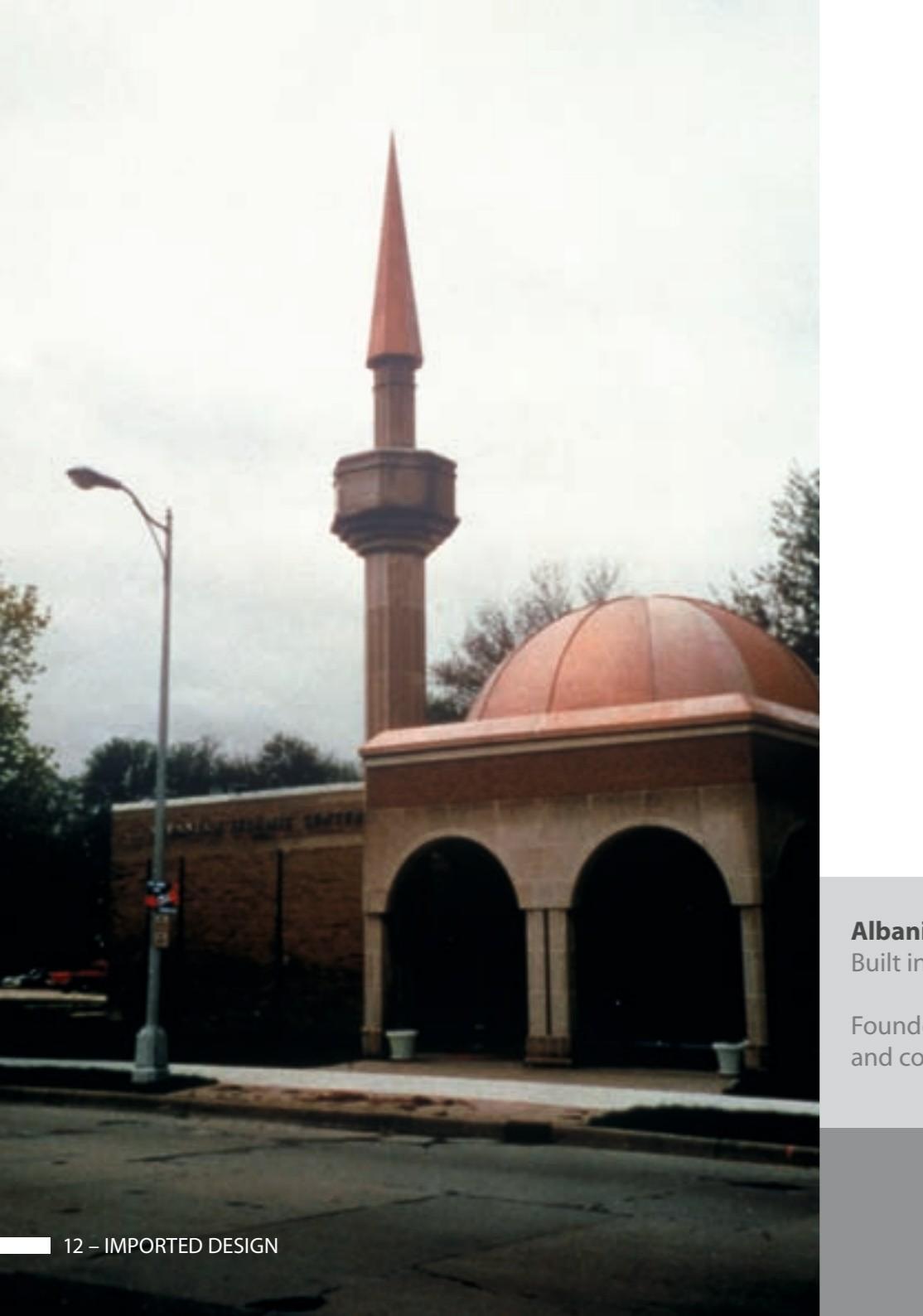
Mosque Abu Bakr Al Siddiq, Metairie, Louisiana.
Built 1988 by Al-Dahab

The dome-shaped ceiling of the main worship area gives the room a sense of volume and holds a star-shaped skylight in its center. The mosque suffered virtually no damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and within 10 days the Imam was able to return to the mosque.



Islamic Center of Southern Maryland, Prince Frederick, Maryland. Built 1986 by Dr. Nabil Damalouji.

This hexagon-shaped, teal-domed mosque stands amid the rolling tobacco fields of Southern Maryland. Three arches frame its entrance, the mosque is a healthy mix of traditional Islamic and contemporary architecture of the Mid-Atlantic state.



Albanian Islamic Center, Harper Woods, Michigan.
Built in 1962 by Frank Beymer.

Founded by Albanian Muslim immigrants, the Ottoman exterior, sleek arches, dome, and color scheme present a clear statement of the mosque's national character.



Islamic Center of Cleveland (Grand Mosque), Parma, Ohio.
Built 1989 – 1995 by Gerald M. Rembowski.

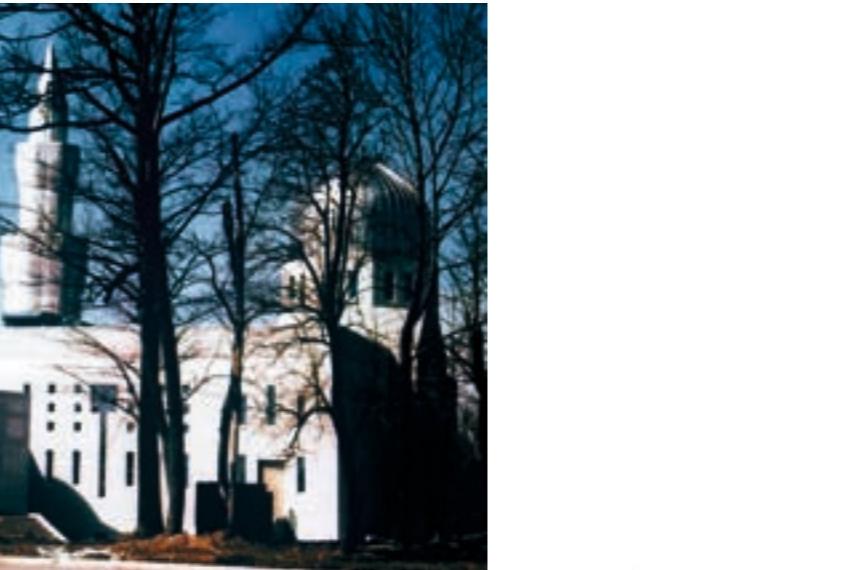
The Grand Mosque is an Islamic architectural landmark. The golden-plated dome is a replica of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, one of the most holy sites of Islam.



Bait Al-Islam Mosque, Maple, Ontario, Canada.

Built in 1992 by Gulzar Haider.

The religious center combines a main prayer hall capped by a stainless steel dome. The architect successfully captures the spirit of medieval Mamluk architecture of Egypt in the new setting of Canada.

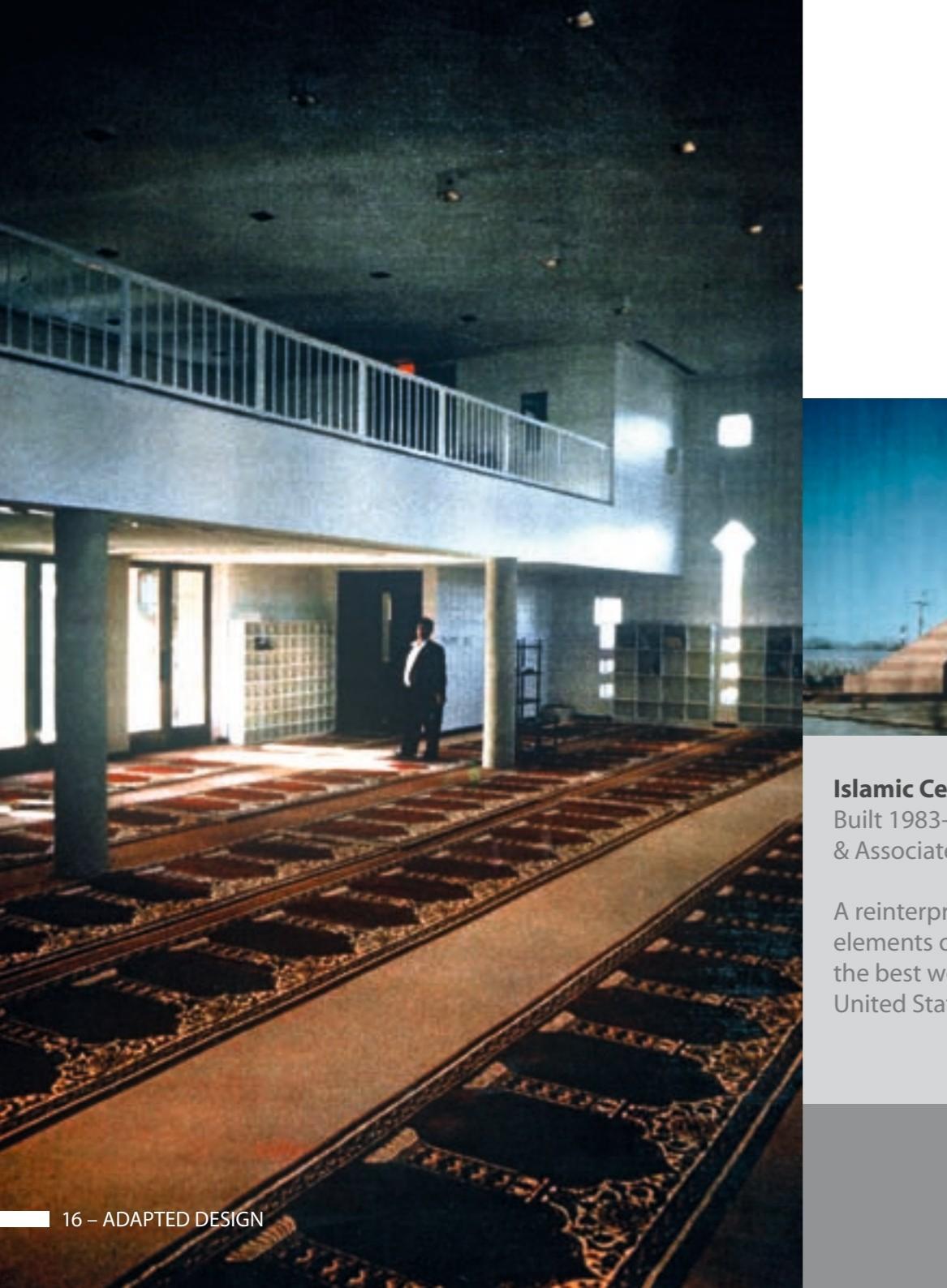


Islamic Center of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Built 1990 by Frahar-Favoro.

The mosque is the largest in southern Virginia, and blends well within the existing environment.





Islamic Center of Jonesboro, Arkansas.

Built 1983-84 by architect Brackett-Kennerich & Associates.

A reinterpretation of tradition, combined with elements of American architecture. Has one of the best women's galleries of any mosque in the United States.



The Islamic Center of Tucson, Arizona. Built in 1990.

The Center was founded in 1966, though the purpose-built Islamic Center building was completed in 1990. In response to the growing number of Muslim students at the University of Arizona, the mosque was built at a cost of approximately 1 million dollars. The current Islamic Center was built after the old mosque, a converted house, became so crowded that people were sometimes forced to pray in the parking lot.



The Islamic Center of Connecticut, Windsor. Built 1993-94.

Designed by Architect Anwar Hossain. The center is also known as Madina Masjid. The mosque accommodates women in a gallery built for that purpose. The gallery space is proportionate to the women's average attendance at the mosque on Fridays.

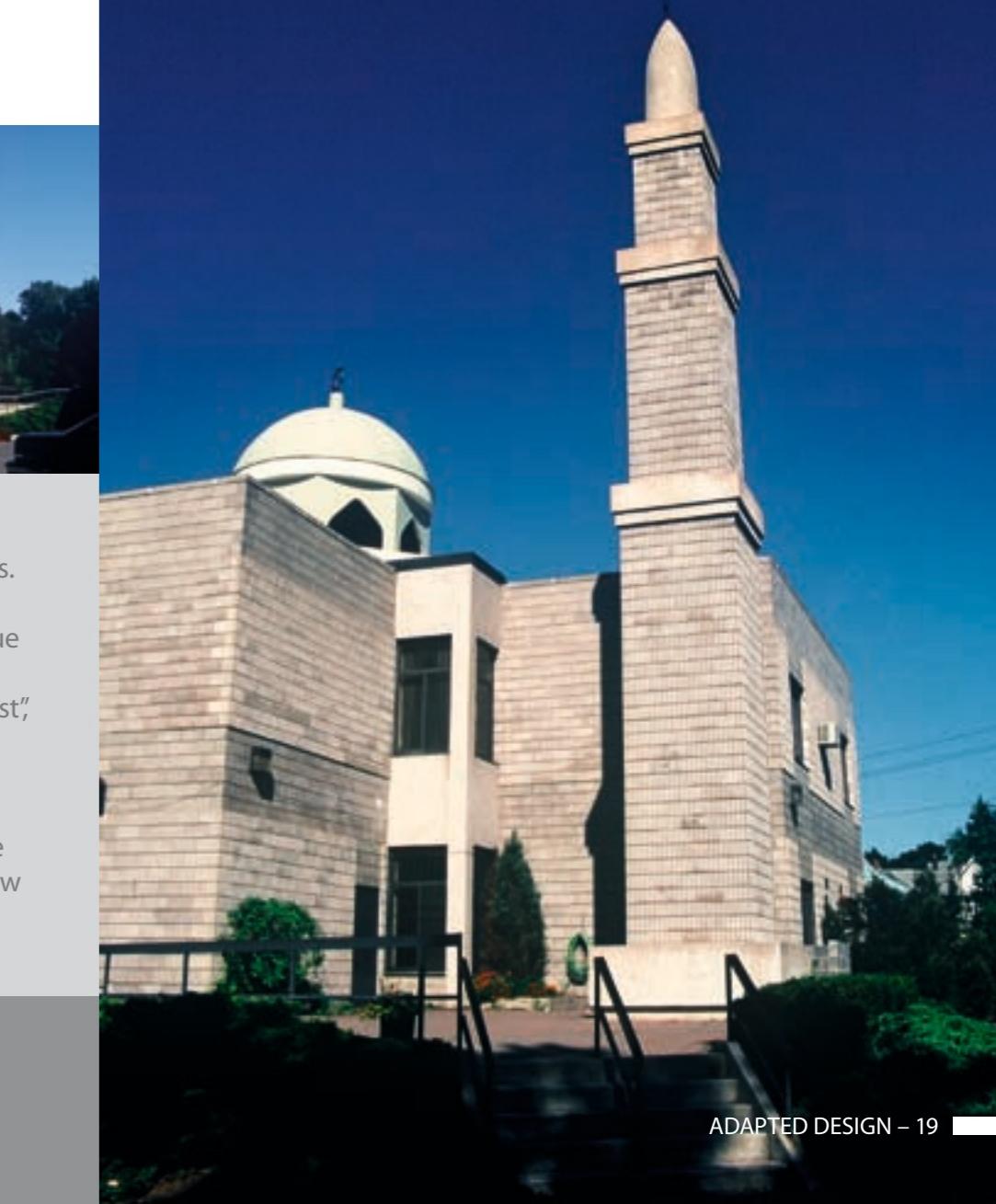
The Islamic Center of Indianapolis

Strong emphasis on separate entrances for men and women is a unique feature of this mosque's architecture. It demonstrates the variety of approaches to mosque design in America, depending on the congregation's preference.



**Islamic Center of Teaneck (Darul Islah),
New Jersey.** Built 1984-86 by Molinari-Stubaus.

The minaret was completed in 1988. The mosque is located in the city of Teaneck, which by the New York Times was called "Jerusalem of the West", because of its large number of churches and synagogues. The addition of the Mosque has given this comparison more meaning. The community is currently planning an extension to the mosque, which will include classrooms and a new parking lot.

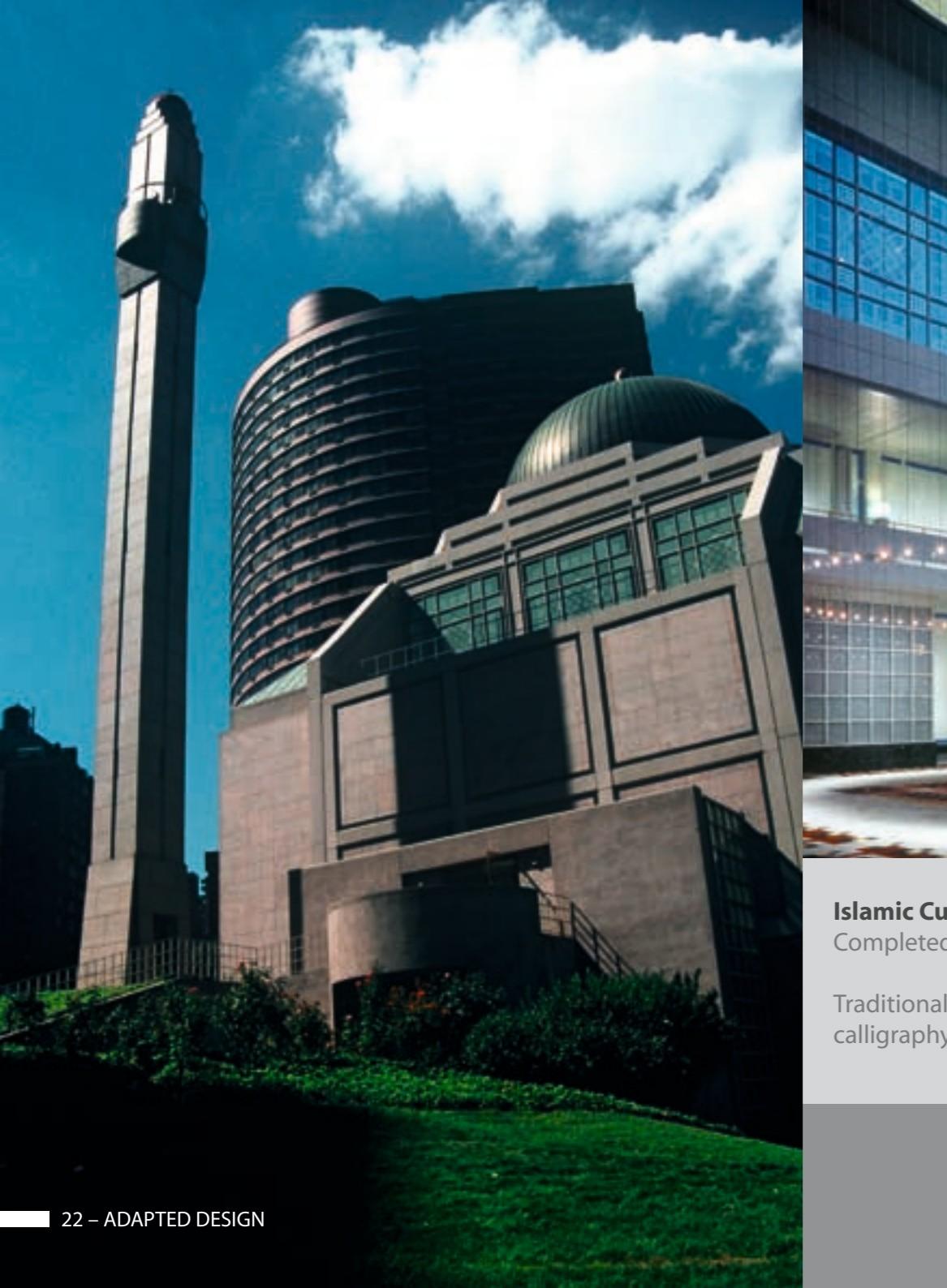




Islamic Center Village, Abiquiu, New Mexico.

Built 1981 by Hassan Fathy, a renowned architect from Egypt.

Traditional Islamic domed, vaulted and arched forms and Egyptian partial earth construction techniques of this mosque complement both the local adobe buildings and Spanish architecture of the region.



Islamic Cultural Center, New York, New York.
Completed in 1991 by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

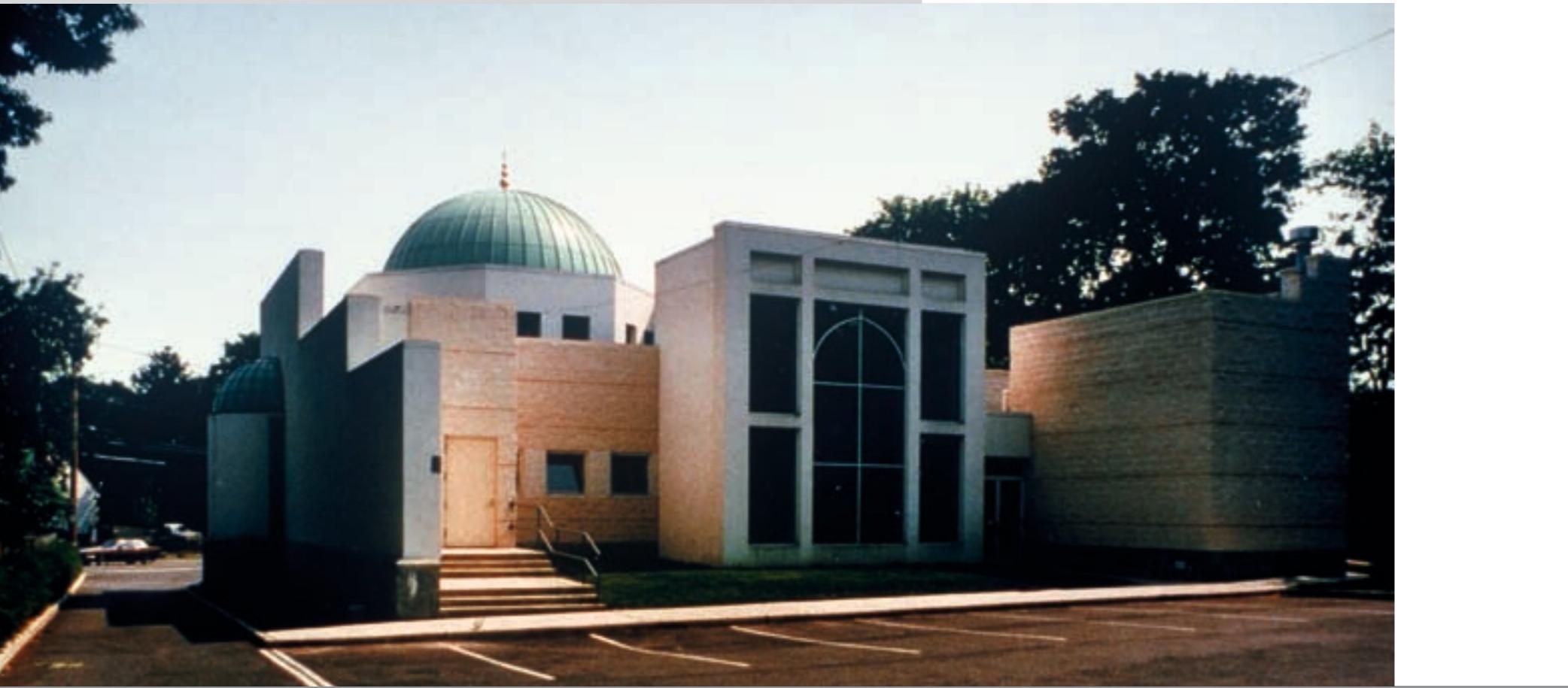
Traditional Ottoman forms, as well as Islamic geometrical icons and calligraphy are expressed effectively in contemporary architectural language.

The slenderness, abstract articulation, and height of the minaret stand in elegant contrast to the massiveness of the mosque proper. The design was the result of a lively debate about the mosque of the 21st century that would communicate a „welcoming image, which includes, rather than excludes the public.“ Since its completion in 1991, the mosque has become a landmark in Manhattan.



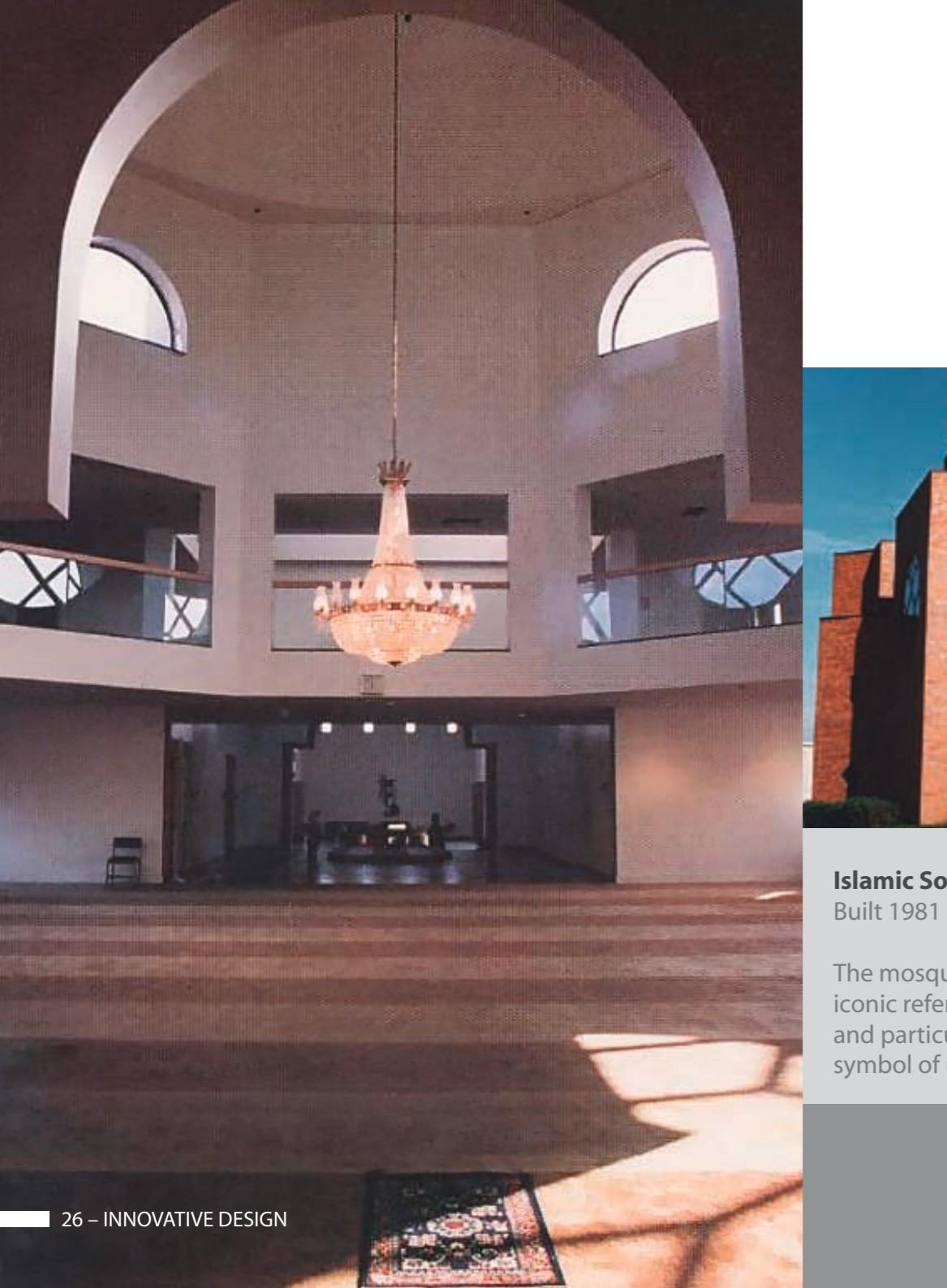
Islamic Center of Long Island, Westbury, New York.
Built 1989-93 by Hirsch/Danois.

With an inspiring prayer room featuring traditional Islamic architecture set in a modern American context. The architect had worked in the Middle East and India, and was sensitive to both religious requirements and the demands of the local environment.



Islamic Center of Pullman (Masjid Al Farouq), Pullman, Washington.
Built 1982 by Earl Russell, designed by Munir Dawud.

The traditional minaret graces the Islamic Center of Pullman. It successfully synthesizes the demands of the local climate while conforming to the liturgical requirements of Islam.



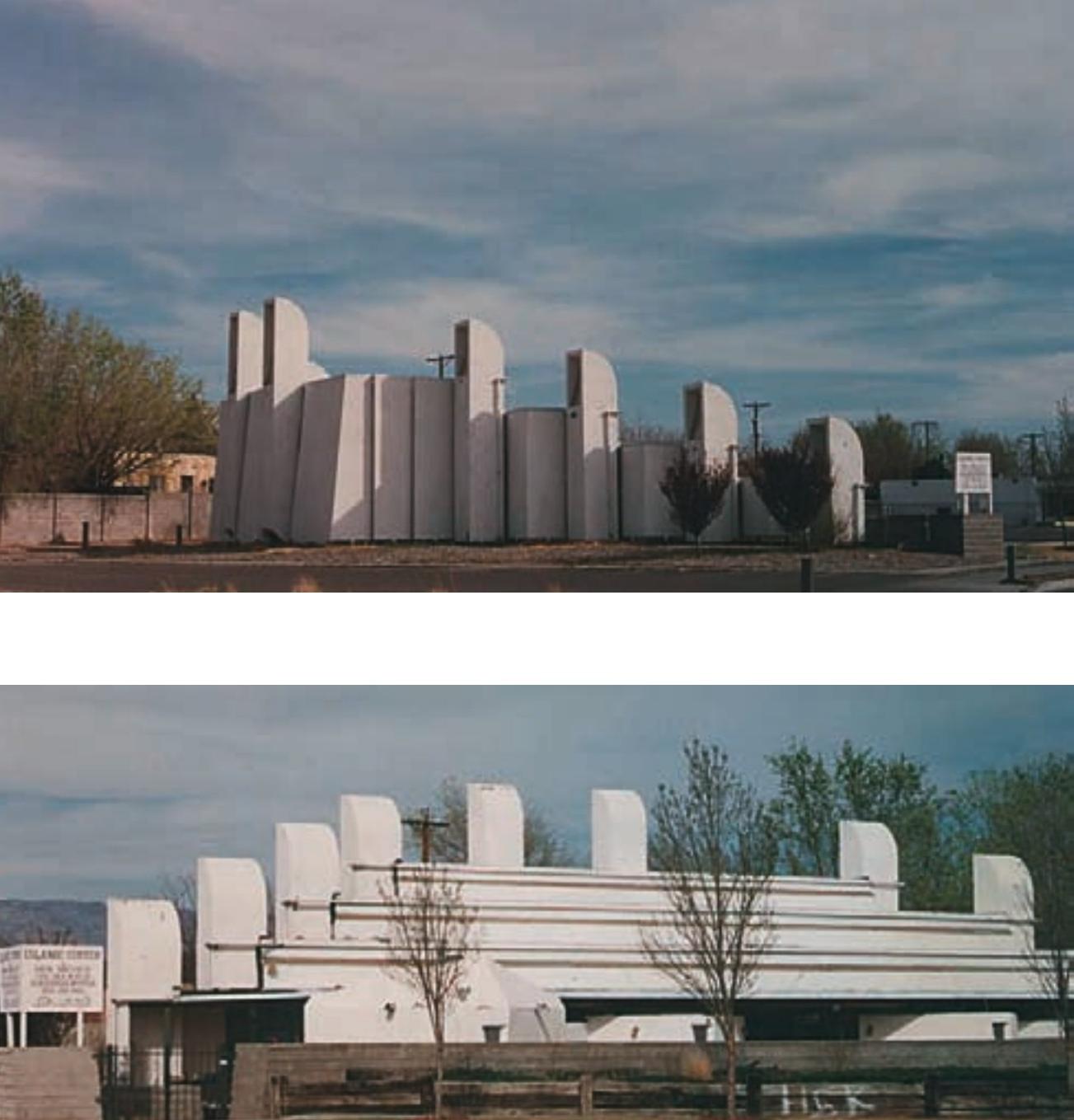
Islamic Society of North America, Headquarters. Plainfield, Indiana.
Built 1981 by Gulzar Haider.

The mosque has an austere contemporary character that is entirely without iconic references to traditional Islamic architecture. The mystical geometry, and particularly its cubical form, are a subliminal reminder of the Ka'ba, the symbol of unity.

Islamic Center of Albuquerque.
Albuquerque, New Mexico.
Built 1985-86 by Bart Prince.

The innovative design of the Islamic Center rethought the possibilities of geometry, space, structure, and material.

This mosque was demolished in 2005 to make space for the new Islamic Center of New Mexico currently under construction. The demolition of the avant garde style in favor of a more traditional style reflects the changing taste in the local community.





Design: Miller Partners communications, Berlin

Fotos: Dr. Kalidi is a researcher and chronist of mosque architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston.
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